

Divers and researchers help protect UK reef habitats

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Diving with seafan. Credit: Seasearch and Richard Morton

Divers and experts are calling for more action to protect biodiversity-rich UK rocky reefs for the future.

The UK has a number of shallow-water coral species. There are large tracts of rocky reefs that host these beautiful slow-growing leathery and soft corals, amongst colourful sponges, bryozoans, sea anemones and hydroids. Many corals are extremely fragile, susceptible to damage by fishing gear and protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Volunteer divers have spent thousands of hours surveying waters around Wales and South West England. As a result, experts now have a better understanding of the location of these reefs and their distribution with respect to seabed protection.

The work is the result of a collaborative study between Seasearch, the Environment and Sustainability Institute and the Centre for Ecology and Conservation at the University of Exeter, the Cornwall Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority, and Marine Conservation Society.

This work will be presented at the South West Marine Ecosystems Conference on April 8 in Plymouth.

Seasearch, University of Exeter academics and the Marine Conservation Society would like more to be done to protect reefs at The Manacles, near Falmouth, and in Whitsand and Looe Bay in Cornwall, to safeguard these areas from bottom-towed gear. This research is informing new management measures currently being developed by the Cornwall Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority that will lead to the reefs in these areas having greater protection from potentially damaging activities.

Chris Wood, Joint National Seasearch Co-ordinator said: "Divers have a vested interest in protecting the amazingly varied marine life that they see on a regular basis but which most people have no idea of. Seasearch gives the opportunity for ordinary divers to do their bit for marine conservation and the pink sea fan is only one example of many species we now know much more about as a result of their efforts."

Details of this citizen science work can be found in a paper published in *Marine Policy*. It shows more than 2,800 colonies of pink seafan coral have been recorded in Wales and South West England, of which 60 per cent were in Marine Protected Areas.

Dr Jean-Luc Solandt, Principal Specialist on Marine Protected Areas at the Marine Conservation Society said: "This work highlights the importance of citizen scientists being able to effectively and comprehensively map the whereabouts of iconic species of conservation

interest. We are delighted to learn from analysis of the data that much of the pink seafan population is now protected from trawling and scallop dredging."

Stephen Pikesley, Research Associate at the University of Exeter's Environment and Sustainability Institute, who conducted the analysis said: "The findings from this exciting collaborative project show the utility of 'citizen science' databases. Contributions from the public, when collected through an organised scheme such as Seasearch, often have expansive spatial and temporal coverage that would otherwise be logistically and financially challenging to collect."

Provided by University of Exeter

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